



Centre for Charitable Giving
and Philanthropy

How do donors choose which charity to support?

The role of donor taste, beneficiary
need and nonprofit competence in
selection of recipients for charitable
donations

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How do donors choose which of over 164,000 charities to support, given...

- The limited information they can gather
- Their limited ability to cognitively process the merits of alternative recipients
- The fact that values and preferences change over time
- The limited amount of time they are willing and able to devote to this decision

Methodology

60 semi-structured telephone interviews conducted between January-August 2009 with a sample recruited in 3 waves with the assistance of the Charities Aid Foundation.

- All 60 interviewees are CAF account holders
- c.1/3 high income, 1/3 middle income, 1/3 lower income (self-described)
- Interviews lasted on average 25 mins (min=12 mins; max= 46 min)
- 22 women, 38 men
- c.1/3 from the North, 2/3 from the South
- Spread of ages from 30s-80s with 60s most highly represented decade

Extensive support for previous research finding:

**“To be a charitable concern, a recipient had to be ‘in need’”
(Fenton, Golding et al 1993:23)**

Why do charities exist?

“To help needy people”

“To do something worthwhile”

“To do good works”

“To help people without a voice”

Who do charities help?

“The needy”

“The underprivileged”

“People in a disadvantaged position”

“People who can’t defend themselves”

“People I feel sorry for”

“People who are worse off than me”

Despite expectations of needs-based giving, at least four other approaches are identified:

1. Taste-based giving
2. Decisions based on judgements of charities' competence
3. Decisions related to donors' personal background
4. Decisions driven by desire to make an impact

Committed donors are not necessarily careful donors

“Why did I choose those particular ones? Well, that has been a bit haphazard to be quite honest with you. I mean, I’ve sort of come across them as I’ve gone along”

“I don’t think I go into it that deeply. If I’m satisfied it’s being helpful and there’s a need... you know, we’re keen to help”

“I’m not methodical about it... I don’t have any very good way of choosing... I just go by gut instinct I suppose”.

Donor: *“I’ve just realised I’ve got a list [of my donations] here. It says, ‘The X foundation’*

BB: *“What does that do?”*

Donor” *“I’m not even sure now [laughs].*

Donors find it difficult to make decisions about charitable recipients and use strategies to assist decision-making

“I couldn’t really have any definite reason for saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’, but you can’t support the lot. I stick a pin in”.

“The trouble is there’s so many”

“It’s amazing what comes through the door, and you’ve got no means of making an objective judgement”.

Strategies range from the comprehensive to the totally arbitrary:

- Boxes
- Birthday

Donors classify and use mental maps to cope with the complexity of the charity sector

People charities	Animal charities
Domestic causes ('Home')	International causes ('Away')
Urgent needs	Ongoing needs
Big charities	Small charities
Things that interest me	Things that don't interest me
Things I should support	Things I enjoy supporting
Causes that are important	Causes I don't care about
Charities with a big 'C'	Charities with a small 'c'

Taste-based giving

“It’s really what in one’s own mind one thinks is a deserving cause, and it does range, you know, hugely widely, and totally irrationally. I mean, I would support deserving dogs but I wouldn’t support cats [laughs] because I just happen not to like cats”

“I donate to the RSPB [Royal Society for the Protection of Birds] because birdwatching is one of my great obsessions. It’s my, kind of, my treat to myself, if you like”.

“[I support] Sustrans because we’re interested in cycling... Ramblers [Association] sometimes, because we like walking.”

Decisions based on judgements of charities' competence

“I don't think you want [to support] people who've got great big offices and give great big salaries and things like that”.

“If they send too many I feel they're just wasting the money, not spending it properly and so we cut them out”

“I understand X charity are extremely good at delivering their money on site, so to speak, and they keep their administration costs as low as they can, but so much of this is hearsay isn't it? Unless you pore over the books and understand what you're reading, I think it's very difficult”.

Decisions related to donors' personal background

"I grew up by the sea so I support the RNLI"

"I have a child and the very first thing I started off doing was child sponsorship",

"My brother died of bowel cancer so I give to cancer research".

But charitable giving is not deterministic:

"I have dear friends who died in X hospice but you can't support everywhere".

"I exclude most medical ones, cancer for instance, although I've plenty of experience of cancer in the family".

Decisions driven by donors' desire to make an impact

"I support them, but as there are a million members I don't feel I need to respond to every appeal from them, somebody else can!"

"The impression I got is they are well-off compared to other charities"

"I hate to think that we're doing things that the government ought to do"

"With things like the British Library, I mean they're quite well funded but it's just something I believe in".

Using theory to make sense of the data

- The Science of Muddling Through / Incrementalism (Charles Lindblom 1959; 1979)
- Bounded Rationality (Herbert Simon 1981)
- Cultural Refusal (Mary Douglas 1996; 1997)

Conclusions

Decisions about which charities to support are complex problems

Need is not the sole determinant behind charitable decision-making

Taste, values, preferences, judgements about charity competence, personal background and desire for personal impact all affect donation decisions.

We are all 'discriminating altruists'

Some questions for discussion

1. How do these findings fit (or not!) with the findings of other projects?
2. Do you have any suggestions for other theoretical approaches that could help me to make sense of the data?
3. What are your thoughts on the implications of this project for the giving & philanthropy sector (eg fundraisers, donors, philanthropy advisers)?